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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000389

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [FR](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FRENCH AND OTHER EU CHIEFS OF MISSION
WON'T ATTEND MARCH 14 CONVENTION

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) French CDA Parant held firm to his view not to attend the March 14 bloc's convention. Not attending, he argued, takes away a potential argument by the Lebanese opposition that France and the EU unreasonably favors March 14 over the political opposition and avoids setting a precedent for attending other political meetings. EU states agreed on the morning of March 14th to send DCM-level representation to the event later that day. The conversation also touched on the Arab League Summit, cabinet expansion, and Hizballah. End Summary.

FRENCH CHARGE: BETTER NOT TO ATTEND
AND GIVE THE OPPOSITION AMMUNITION

2. (C) Charge Sison and DCM met with French CDA Andre Parant and DCM Joseph Silva at mid-day on March 14th to urge that Parant change his decision not to attend the March 14 bloc's convention, to be held later that day. EU embassies in Beirut had taken a common position earlier in the week not to attend at the COM level. Charge had earlier tried unsuccessfully to convince Parant and the British Ambassador to attend. Parant gave us the updated news that the key EU states had consulted earlier that day and decided to send representatives at the DCM level, an upgrade for some, including France and the UK, compared to earlier plans.

3. (C) Parant listened to Charge's arguments regarding the importance of COM-level attendance by states like France which are important supporters of March 14. He responded, a bit defensively, that France's support for the GOL and for March 14 were "well known." No one could doubt that given that French President Sarkozy had warmly received March 14 figures PM Fouad Siniora and MP Saad Hariri in Paris. He cited two arguments to support his view against his attending. One, it would be better not to give the opposition another pretext for charging that the international community is unreasonably supportive of only one side, March 14, in the Lebanese impasse. Two, he does not want to set a precedent for having to attend all such "political meetings" including those of parties or blocs France does not support.

4. (C) "Why is this so important to the U.S.?" Parant asked. Among the reasons, Charge responded, was that the U.S.,

France and others had for so long been urging March 14 to organize itself better; now that it was taking steps to do that, we all should encourage that. U.S. support for March 14 was unambiguous, she said, as exemplified by President Bush's letter to the bloc, of which Parant was already aware.

15. (SBU) Parant said that when EU embassies in Beirut had consulted earlier in the week, some had wanted to attend at some level, others not at all. France, acting as the EU presidency, sought common ground, which meant COMs would not attend. Key EU states had consulted again on the morning of March 14th and decided in response to the requests from March 14 figures to upgrade their representation to DCM or equivalent levels.

POLITICS: ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT, CABINET EXPANSION

16. (C) Charge and Parant then turned to a number of Lebanese political issues.

ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT: Parant confirmed what we heard earlier in they day from Telecommunications Minister and March 14 stalwart Marwan Hamadeh, that the cabinet would decide on Monday March 17th about whether Lebanon would attend the Arab League Summit in Damascus. On March 13th the Syrian deputy FM had delivered an invitation -- addressed to PM Siniora -- through the 'resigned' Foreign Minister, an ally of the opposition. Parant said Siniora does not want to go to Damascus for fear it will alienate Christians in Lebanon who might interpret his action as usurping the role of the presidency, which is reserved for a Maronite.

CABINET EXPANSION VS. MAJORITY MOVING TO ELECT SLEIMAN:
Hamadeh had told us that some in March 14 were pushing

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Siniora to agree to a modified expansion of the cabinet by three persons in order to upgrade the Christian presence. Another action March 14 is considering is moving to elect Michel Sleiman as president using a "half-plus-plus" approach; that is, peeling away some MPs allied with opposition figure Michel Aoun to vote with the March 14 majority and elect Sleiman with a higher number of votes than the majority could muster.

MARCH 14'S POSITION: Parant thinks March 14 is in a better position than it was in January. He cited the successful large demonstration on February 14th, the recent steps to establish a secretariat and organize a convention, the harm done to Michel Aoun's stature by the violent episode of January 27th when his ally Hizballah was seen by many Christians as violent and provocative and recent criticism of the opposition by his supposed ally Michel Murr. He suggested to Charge that the U.S. and France should jointly urge March 14 to agree on a position regarding the electoral law, since the opposition looks united in its proposal but March 14 looks divided and not responsive to the opposition's initiative.

HIZBALLAH IS 'OFF BALANCE'

17. (C) Parant said Hizballah, whose officials he meets, are "off balance" after the January assassination of Mughniya in Damascus. They see the need to retaliate, probably against Israel, and are likely being pressured by insiders to do so, but also know the potential price of striking at Israel would be strong retaliation. They do not want to offer Israel a pretext to attack them, Parant said. Regarding internal politics, Parant thinks Hizballah wants to avoid a Sunni-Shia conflict. He said that one of France's contacts in Hizballah had told him that the likelihood of the parliamentary election scheduled for 2009 would be close was reason for Hizballah and the opposition to cooperate more closely with the March 14 bloc.

